CHAPTER FIVE

Social Self-Care

A few years ago, I wrote, "My soul longs for connection, and my body craves isolation." On the one hand, I crave connection, community, and belonging. On the other hand, being in a room with another human body overwhelms me. Not to mention the challenges of navigating social differences, group dynamics, and cross-neurotype interactions! You might recognize some of these feelings too.

From sensory limitations to cultural and communication differences to being misunderstood by those around us, Autistic people encounter numerous barriers when it comes to establishing social connections and a sense of belonging. But social connectedness is incredibly important for overall health, both physically and mentally! Discovering how to authentically connect with people while staying true to yourself is a powerful act of self-care.

When it comes to social self-care, there are two distinct aspects to consider: first, how to navigate an allistic world with minimal harm to yourself, and second, how to forge authentic and meaningful relationships. These objectives are slightly different because the strategies that help you survive in an allistic world may assist you in securing a job or accessing education, but they might not be the right strategies for fostering a genuine sense of connection with others. This chapter will address both of these social goals.

Topics are broken down into the categories of authentic relationships, interactions with neurotypicals, healthy relationships, and romantic relationships. Entries focus on a range of topics, such as navigating conflicting sensory needs, embracing Autistic communication styles, strategic use of self-disclosure, and more. You have so much to offer those around you—building strong relationships can foster meaningful connections that help you feel seen and provide a sense of belonging.

Make Connections Through Special Interests

Authentic Relationships

While allistic people often establish relationships through small talk and social-based conversations, Autistic people usually feel the strongest sense of connection when engaging with others over shared interests and values. Part of taking care of yourself is becoming aware of these preferences so you can create social experiences that work for you.

Your interests and values are deeply integrated into your identity and sense of self. When you delve into the intricacies of a special interest, you open up and share your inner world with another person. Precisely because your values and interests are closely intertwined with your identity, you'll likely feel most connected with others when relating over shared values and interests.

Here are some ways to forge friendships around your interests:

- **Identify your special interests:** Start by discovering your passions and interests, as these will be your common ground with potential friends.
- **Join relevant communities:** Seek out groups, clubs, or online forums that align with your interests and values.
- **Engage actively:** Participate in discussions and activities within your chosen communities, sharing your thoughts and experiences.
- **Be patient:** Building authentic friendships takes time, so allow connections to develop naturally, and practice patience.

By embracing the power of connecting through shared interests and ideals, you create opportunities to engage authentically with others. These connections can be rich and fulfilling, allowing you to foster authentic relationships based on shared passions and values.

Understand the Double Empathy Problem

Authentic Relationships

Have you ever experienced a disconnection between yourself and the people around you? Building authentic relationships can be challenging, particularly when you're striving to bridge the invisible gap with non-Autistic people!

Unfortunately, prevailing autism narratives often blame failed social encounters on the Autistic person's "deficits." People figuratively point fingers at Autistic people, accusing us of a lack of empathy and an inability to understand the perspectives of others (the ability to think about other people's mental states is often referred to as "theory of mind"). These assumptions fail to consider that non-Autistic people *also* experience empathy and theory of mind challenges when communicating across different neurotypes.

The "double empathy problem" offers a fresh perspective that challenges this prevailing view. Dr. Damian Milton, an Autistic sociologist, introduced this concept in the journal *Disability & Society* in 2012 to shed light on the mutual difficulties both parties face in understanding each other's frames of reference. It invites people to recognize that the difficulties and misunderstandings they encounter in social interactions emerge from a shared struggle to understand one another.

It acknowledges that when people with different neurotypes interact, a breakdown in communication occurs in both directions. This breakdown arises not from any inherent deficits in Autistic individuals but rather from the differences in communication styles each person is bringing to the table. It is through these differences that the breakdown emerges, and the wider the gap in neurocognitive styles, the more pronounced the communication challenges.

Supporting Milton's hypothesis, empirical studies (such as one published in 2020 by *Frontiers in Psychology*) have shown the impact of neurotype on social interactions. These studies paired participants based on their neurotype

and revealed that Autistic people were able to build rapport effectively with one another, as were non-Autistic individuals. However, the most challenging pairings were between Autistic and non-Autistic individuals. Additional research has shown that Autistic people experience heightened closeness, rapport, reciprocity, and comfort in disclosing personal information when they're with fellow Autistic people. And it makes sense that Autistic people find it easier to establish connections with others who share our neurotype!

The key point to remember with the double empathy problem is that you possess a distinct social interaction style and culture, not a deficit in social skills.

Social-communication difficulties occur in the space between two different styles and are not due to one person only. Try to reject those simplistic narratives that place the blame on the Autistic person and instead consider this challenge through a broader cross-cultural lens.

We can build stronger social bonds if everyone collectively assumes responsibility for understanding and embracing one another. By valuing a diversity of communication styles, we can forge deeper connections, cultivate empathy, and celebrate the beauty of neurodiversity.

Embrace High-Context Communication

Authentic Relationships

Autistic people have a distinct communication style. One component of that is context-heavy communication. Context-heavy communication can look like giving a lot of background.

When sharing an idea, I feel compelled to provide the complete context. For instance, during a recent podcast episode, I shared a simple example of how understanding my neurodivergence has improved communication with my spouse. However, I found myself unpacking the entire backstory of how my spouse and I got to this conversation! Every idea I have exists in a specific context. Context permeates every aspect of my thoughts. This model might resonate with you too.

And it's not just that we communicate in a context-heavy way; we also need context to understand as listeners. This may involve asking numerous questions. Many of us construct mental context maps to provide frame-works for anchoring the information. You may notice that you need more context than an allistic speaker is providing. That's perfectly fine! Your brain is seeking context to facilitate understanding and retention of ideas.

Some discomfort can arise because Autistic people are often chastised for "providing too much detail." While it is good to be mindful that not

everyone may have the patience for your context-heavy communication style, you should not feel ashamed of it.

Here are some ways to embrace high-context communication:

- If you have difficulty knowing what context questions to ask, consider **preparing ahead of time**. Think about the most critical pieces of context you need in order to navigate a particular conversation.
- When responding to contextless queries, having a few **key phrases** on hand can be helpful for those moments when you feel confused. For example, you can respond with, "That question is kind of vague; can you provide me more context for why you are asking?" Or, when someone poses a broad question like, "Tell me about yourself," you might respond with, "That's a broad question; what specifically would you like to know?"
- It's also helpful to recognize that not everyone may have the patience for the level of detail you naturally provide (or ask for). One approach is to **follow up later** or over email with additional questions, allowing you to delve into the specifics when the timing is right. You may even ask the person, "Would it be better if I followed up over email with additional questions?" This way, if the person is in the middle of a transition or occupied, they can address your questions at a more convenient time.

Your brain naturally associates ideas with their respective contexts, adding richness to your thought processes, and while this may not always be appreciated by those around you, remember this is part of the richness that adds to the deep processing style of Autistic brains.

Connect with Others Through Story Swapping

Authentic Relationships

Have you ever heard a friend share something that happened to them, then instinctively responded by sharing a similar experience you had? That's called story swapping, and it tends to be a natural communication method for Autistic people. Within Autistic culture, story swapping serves as a means of connecting, relating, and expressing empathy. However, this tendency is unfortunately often misunderstood by allistic culture as redirecting the focus onto ourselves instead of genuinely aiming to connect.

When you are among fellow Autistic people, you will likely find that connecting through shared story swapping is a natural and comfortable way to bond. Finding opportunities to story swap is a great way to create and strengthen social connections.

If you would like to make your story swapping more allistic friendly when interacting with allistic people, here's a helpful strategy to consider: Try doing what I call the "dance back": After sharing your own story, make a conscious effort to redirect the attention back to them (you're "dancing" the conversation back to them). For example, after sharing a relatable story, you might say, "When that happened to me, I felt really vulnerable. Was it intense for you as well?" Alternatively, if you're discussing a challenging work situation, you can smoothly transition by saying, "I experienced something similar at work (insert your story here). It was quite stressful, and I remember feeling overwhelmed. How did you handle the stress?" By explicitly linking your experience to theirs, you demonstrate a genuine interest in their perspective and an empathetic desire to connect and learn more.

It is also always beneficial to approach conversations with curiosity rather than assuming how the other person feels, as most people respond more positively to curiosity. The "dance back" approach allows you to honor your natural story-swapping instinct while deepening your interactions.

Play in Parallel

Authentic Relationships

Sometimes, I jokingly say that one of the reasons I married my spouse is because our early dates revolved around coffee shops, books, and writing. We excelled at parallel play. Parallel play (or parallel work) refers to engaging in a solo activity alongside someone else doing a similar solo activity. For Autistic people, parallel play allows each person to engage in their own activities while still enjoying the presence and connection of another person.

Whether it's reading in the same room as a partner, friend, or family member; studying alongside a classmate; or spending time immersed in your interest while someone else does the same nearby, parallel play can help you form social connections in a way that works for you and your body.

To give this a try, you can start by asking a friend to join you in playing video games, visiting a coffee shop to read, or studying. If meeting in person isn't feasible, you can also explore virtual options. For example, you can set up a Zoom call and work on a project simultaneously, creating a virtual workspace.

See if you both appreciate the comfort and closeness that come from sharing space and time together, even when pursuing your individual interests.

Join in Autistic Culture

Authentic Relationships

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in Autistic spaces specifically created by and for Autistic people. A 2019 article in *Metaphilosophy* described accounts of many Autistic people having an immediate sense of belonging and feeling at home when stepping into these spaces. Interestingly, when allistic people enter these spaces, they often express feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and confusion about how to interact with others. These observations reflect the existence of a distinct Autistic culture.

But what exactly is Autistic culture? Autistic culture encompasses the shared experiences, perspectives, values, and ways of being that are unique to the Autistic community. It goes beyond individual traits and describes a collective culture formed by the lived experiences of Autistic people.

Connecting with Autistic culture, whether through physical spaces, online platforms, or digital communities, is a powerful self-care practice that allows you to build bonds while being yourself. It is through these relationships that many of us finally experience a sense of belonging, connectedness, and authentic engagement. Discovering Autistic spaces and culture can empower you to have the courage to unmask and explore your true self.

Here are a few ways you can engage with Autistic culture as a way to build meaningful social connections to the community at large:

- **Seek out Autistic-led communities:** Look for online communities, forums, and social media groups that are led by and centered around Autistic voices. These spaces allow you to interact with people with similar experiences and perspectives.
- **Participate in Autistic events and gatherings:** Attend conferences, workshops, neurodivergent affinity groups, and meetups specifically organized by and for Autistic people. These events provide opportunities to connect with others, learn from their insights, and engage in

discussions about topics relevant to the Autistic community. (Note: Neurodivergent groups are becoming more prevalent in workplaces and educational institutions, so be sure to check if your school or workplace offers these opportunities!)

- **Explore Autistic arts, literature, and media:** Dive into the rich world of Autistic creativity and expression. Discover Autistic authors, artists, filmmakers, and musicians whose works reflect the diverse experiences and talents within the Autistic community. Engaging with their creations can deepen your understanding of and connection to Autistic culture.
- **Educate yourself about Autistic history and activism:** Learn about the history of the Autistic rights movement, advocacy efforts, and achievements of Autistic activists. Familiarize yourself with the challenges faced by the Autistic community and the progress made in promoting acceptance, inclusion, and neurodiversity.
- **Engage in dialogue and listen to Autistic voices:** Actively seek out Autistic perspectives by reading blogs, articles, and books written by Autistic authors. Listen to Autistic podcasts to hear about lived experiences. Consider following Autistic activists, advocates, and influencers on social media to gain insights and stay updated on important conversations within the Autistic community.

The Autistic community is a rich place where you can make connections you didn't even realize existed. Try reaching out in ways you feel comfortable with—you'll likely have interesting experiences and find meaningful connections.

Embrace Object-Based Conversations

Authentic Relationships

Dr. Marilyn Monteiro is a clinician, writer, and researcher and the founder of the MIGDAS, one of the few affirming autism assessments available. I had a light bulb moment while listening to her training on how she assesses Autistic children. She emphasized the value of leading with object-based conversations rather than social-based conversations when first meeting Autistic children. Social-based conversations, starting with questions like "How are you?" or "Tell me about yourself," often cause Autistic children to freeze and retreat inward. However, when you begin a conversation by delving into a specific topic, particularly one of interest to the child, you witness them open up and engage more readily.

This understanding of object-based versus social-based conversation helped me make sense of thirty-seven years of communication struggles. I had often wondered why I found questions like "Tell me about yourself" or "What did you do this weekend?" challenging, while I could effortlessly dive into discussions about books, ideas, philosophy, and psychology. It was because social-based questions often trigger a mini freeze response in many Autistic people. These questions tend to be vague and abstract, and it is challenging to succinctly capture the intricacies of our inner worlds in a single answer. Plus, they can also feel intrusive, acting as a sensory demand that requires us to quickly process and respond.

Thinking of these conversation styles using a visual might help you understand them even more thoroughly. For social-based conversations, imagine two individuals facing each other, engaging in a dialogue centered around themselves. For object-based conversations, picture a scene where two people stand side by side, their attention directed toward a captivating sunset as they discuss the intricacies of its beauty. If you find object-based conversations more enjoyable for you, embrace them! Recognizing and accepting your preferred communication styles is a really effective way to take care of your social self and built authentic connections.

To embrace object-based conversations in your life, consider coming up with conversation starters that are focused on objects or topics rather than purely social elements. This proactive shift can create opportunities for engaging discussions.

Here are a few examples that work in a wide variety of settings:

- "Tell me about an interesting idea you've learned recently."
- "Have you read any good books lately?"
- "What's a fascinating news story that has caught your attention recently?"
- "Do you have a particular hobby or activity that you enjoy?"

You will likely still find yourself in social-based conversations, however. When that happens, you can learn to pivot the conversation back to object-based topics while still addressing the initial inquiry. For instance, if someone says, "Tell me about yourself," you can respond by saying, "That's quite a broad question, but let me share some things I am passionate about and spend a lot of time learning about." By shifting the conversation to more concrete and object-based spaces, you can stay comfortable and true to yourself while still engaging with the person.

Decide Whether to Tell People You Are Autistic

Interactions with Neurotypicals

Telling other people that you are Autistic can be a daunting and anxiety-inducing journey, especially when navigating interactions with neurotypicals. The delicate dance of revealing your true self while grappling with the fear of judgment and misconceptions can make the process both challenging and emotionally charged.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that still heavily stigmatizes autism. This means that when you choose to disclose that you are Autistic, there are some potential negative outcomes to consider. First, the person may misperceive you and make assumptions about you based on their limited understanding. Second, you may find yourself in the position of needing to educate them about autism, which can create awkwardness and tension within the relationship.

When it comes to self-disclosure, it's important to remember that it doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing approach. Partial self-disclosure allows you to gauge the person's response and make further decisions based on that.

Examples of partial self-disclosure include statements such as:

- "I am neurodivergent."
- "I sometimes need extra time to process information."
- "I may not always make eye contact."
- "I struggle with unexpected changes in plans."

If the person responds to a statement like this positively, showing understanding, you may feel more comfortable disclosing more about yourself. However, if their response is judgmental or not supportive, it may be safer to maintain some privacy about your identity in that particular relationship.

Another advantage of not sharing everything up front is that it allows the disclosure to match the pace of closeness in the relationship. What you choose to share on a first meeting or date may differ from what you disclose on a fifth, as trust and closeness develop over time.

Alternatively, some people may opt for complete openness about their Autistic identity, as they want to interact only with those who are already Autistic affirming. This is also a valid choice. (This is why I have chosen to be an openly Autistic psychologist—it helps me connect with Autistic clients and professionals.) However, not everyone has the privilege or safety of being openly Autistic. In these cases, it can be helpful to have preprepared partial self-disclosure statements ready, allowing you to navigate conversations thoughtfully and protect your well-being.

It's also important to prioritize your own well-being when navigating self-disclosure. Recognize that you alone have the right to set boundaries and choose what you disclose about your neurodivergent identity. Self-disclosure is a personal decision based on your comfort level and the trust you have established with the other person. Building authentic relationships requires mutual respect and acceptance, and deciding what you share, when, how, and with whom is your choice to make. Surrounding yourself with understanding and accepting people who respect and value you for who you are is a powerful act of social self-care.

Craft Scripts for Boundary-Setting and Transitions

Interactions with Neurotypicals

Navigating small talk and surface-level interactions can be exhausting and challenging for many Autistic people. Preprepared scripts work as a helpful tool for navigating these situations and reducing anxiety. Scripts are brief statements or blurbs you come up with and rehearse before engaging in social interactions, allowing you to feel more prepared and confident in social situations.

Many Autistic people intuitively engage in this practice. For years I spent a copious amount of time having pretend conversations. Only after my diagnosis did I realize what I was doing—I was developing social scripts and practicing so that I wouldn't feel so caught off guard during social moments.

Some scripting can be seen as a form of masking, since it involves preplanning and rehearsing statements. While I am not advocating for masking as a general practice, this particular exercise can help reduce anxiety and promote self-advocacy skills. In specific scenarios, using preprepared scripts can be beneficial, particularly when they resonate with your authentic self and act as tools for self-advocacy. This approach transforms them into tools for self-empowerment rather than tools for masking your identity.

Let's explore some scenarios where utilizing social scripts can be helpful:

- **Boundary-setting:** Setting boundaries can be challenging, especially for Autistic people. Learning and practicing simple phrases like "No, I'm sorry, I am not able to do that right now" or "I'm not comfortable answering that question" can provide you with ready-made responses for high-pressure moments when formulating boundary statements on the spot may be difficult.

- **Small talk/introductions:** Small talk can often be anxiety inducing for many of us. It's helpful to have a few statements ready to quickly answer questions, transition the conversation, or politely exit. For example, having an exit statement ready can help you gracefully leave the conversation with more ease by saying, "It's been lovely chatting with you" or "It was a pleasure to meet you." These phrases can help you navigate these moments with greater ease, making social interactions more comfortable.
- **Self-advocacy:** There are moments when advocating for yourself becomes essential, especially in high-stress situations. During such times, it can be challenging to gather your thoughts and express your needs effectively. It's helpful to have preprepared self-advocacy statements at your disposal. For instance, you can say something like, "I'm finding this situation very stressful, and I need a moment to collect my thoughts. Can we pause for a few minutes, or can you give me some space to regroup?" These prepared statements empower you to communicate your needs clearly and assertively, ensuring that your concerns are addressed effectively.

To make the most of social scripts, write them down and practice saying them aloud, or engage in rehearsing conversations when alone. The goal is to become comfortable with the words so that, in high-pressure moments, there is a sense of muscle memory that allows you to say the words more easily.

Brainstorming social scripts ahead of time can reduce anxiety and support your social self-care. Used properly, they can provide a sense of empowerment and confidence, allowing you to communicate your authentic self to others more effectively.

Practice Context Awareness

Interactions with Neurotypicals

Context adjustment, the process of adapting to varying social norms and behaviors in different situations and settings, can be challenging for Autistic people. While this difficulty is also commonly known as "context blindness," I find the term coined by Autistic psychologist Dr. Amara Brook, "context independence," more fitting. Context independence means your behavior lives and exists independent of your context. Given this, you may struggle to understand how social rules apply in one context but not another. For instance, why is it acceptable to ask certain questions at a social gathering but not in a work context? Why is a certain pickup line appropriate in a bar but not in the grocery store? Allistic brains pick up these context cues subcortically, meaning that their brains intuitively sense them without having to analytically decode all the rules and norms!

While I recognize the challenges of not intuitively picking up context cues, I don't embrace the term "context blindness." Instead of defining this experience by our deficits, I prefer focusing on what we excel at—I see it as a reflection of our profound appreciation for authenticity and our ability to stay true to ourselves, hence why I prefer the term "context independence."

We tend to maintain our authenticity when interacting with people from all walks of life, whether it's a janitor or a CEO. Given the high value we place on authenticity, we often find altering our behavior, actions, and words for various contexts to be inauthentic.

However, because society operates based on an unwritten rule book, context independence can lead to misunderstandings. For instance, Autistic people, particularly cis-het (cisgender-heterosexual) men, disproportionally face accusations of sexual harassment or stalking due to behaviors caused by difficulties understanding context cues around romantic advancements (for example, asking a girl out multiple times or intentionally hanging out

where he knows she will be in order to initiate conversation). This confusion is especially perilous for Black and Brown Autistic men, as grasping these contextual rules can become a matter of safety.

Understanding context cues can help prevent you from getting fired and being accused of sexual harassment and even crimes.

Here are some strategies to navigate the hidden rule book:

- **Seek guidance from friends:** Ask non-Autistic friends and family to help decode the implicit rules. Request their feedback on specific situations.
- **Reflect on experiences:** Take time to reflect on any negative experiences and consider where the interactions went awry. Were there hidden rules or expectations you were unaware of but now know? Writing down your reflections can help you develop "social templates" to understand expected interactions in different social environments.
- **Request explicit feedback and rules from employers:** It can be particularly confusing to figure out the protocol in workplaces, where socializing and professionalism are mixed. Ask your employers for explicit feedback and clarification on social expectations.

While the authenticity you bring to the world is something to celebrate, it can also leave you vulnerable. For this reason, developing some context-shifting skills can be an important way to protect yourself when interacting with allistic people. It's not about completely conforming or shapeshifting, changing who you are, but rather finding a balance that respects both your authenticity and the invisible societal rules around you.

Navigate Conflict

Interactions with Neurotypicals

Conflict is difficult for all humans, but it's especially challenging when it involves individuals with different neurotypes.

Here are two insights gleaned from the school of hard knocks and the mishaps of my own experience:

- **Consider other people's emotions:** As someone who tends to approach conflicts with a factual mindset, I used to believe that if I could just present the facts, both parties would understand each other and resolve the disagreement. However, I've come to realize that many allistic people operate more from their emotions during conflict. Offering emotional validation such as "That sounds really painful" or "It makes sense you would feel that way" goes a long way in de-escalating conflict.
- **Sometimes less is more:** During conflicts, I tend to overexplain and provide excessive context, believing that if the other person grasped the full context and relational dynamics, we could effectively work through the issue. However, my sister once offered me valuable insight: "When you provide extra details, it can come across as defensiveness. Sometimes less is more." I hadn't realized that my strong desire to be understood was perceived as defensiveness. This feedback has proven invaluable. Although it can be challenging to implement, I have found it to be quite helpful in de-escalating conflicts.

Managing conflicts isn't necessarily a fun part of self-care, but it's worth the time and effort to try to make disagreements more civil and productive.

Identify Red Flags and Green Flags in Friendship

Healthy Relationships

Autistic people are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of because we have more difficulty reading social cues and recognizing deceptive behavior. That's why it's a useful social self-care practice to reflect on red and green flags in friendships and relationships—in other words, positive and negative signs that can help you assess the health of the friendship.

Here are prompts to help you think about what you want in a friendship:

- What qualities or actions make you feel respected in a friendship?
- What communication styles or actions contribute to effective listening from a friend?
- What level of reliability and responsiveness do you expect from a friend?
- What types of support and encouragement do you value in a friendship?
- How do you want your neurodivergent traits to be respected and valued in a friendship?
- How do you prefer conflicts or disagreements to be addressed?
- What are your expectations regarding privacy and confidentiality?

As you answer these questions, pay attention to your instincts to identify your personal green flags (qualities that show that the relationship is meeting your needs) and red flags (concerning behaviors that don't align with your preferences). Fulfilling friendships are an important part of your social life, and knowing what works for you and what doesn't will help you surround yourself with friends who love and respect you just as you are.

Deal with Rejection Sensitivity

Healthy Relationships

"Rejection sensitivity" is a term that describes a heightened sensitivity and intense emotional reaction to perceived rejection—and it's common among ADHDers and Autistic people. Rejection sensitivity makes a lot of sense from a social-evolution perspective. In ancient times, belonging to a group was crucial for a person's safety. Being excluded or ostracized posed significant threats to survival, making belonging synonymous with survival itself!

Even though life is different today, belonging to a social group is still a vital part of being human. As Autistic people, we often feel like outsiders, frequently experiencing threats to our sense of belonging. Consequently, our fight-or-flight responses can be triggered as if our very survival is at stake. Despite the modern understanding that it is not a life-or-death situation, our bodies continue to react as if it were.

Rejection sensitivity plays several tricks on your brain. When you are used to feeling rejection, your mind becomes more attuned to it. And because Autistic people *do* experience more rejection, our brains are typically primed to see it! This unconscious scanning for signs of rejection can result in "false alarms," where we perceive rejection even when it is not actually present. The slightest look, tone of voice, or comment can trigger feelings of rejection. When that happens, we can miss out on connecting with a new friend or deepening an existing friendship.

Becoming aware of this phenomenon will help you minimize its impacts on your relationships. Then you can move on to acknowledging when rejection sensitivity is at play, saying to yourself, "That's my rejection sensitivity acting up." Statements like this create some distance from the immediate emotional reaction and allow you to detach from it. Finally, think about those early humans, and accept the ingrained biological forces at play. This practice can also help alleviate feelings of shame about your rejection sensitivity, because you can place it within the larger tapestry of human history.

Balance Social Connection and Alone Time

Healthy Relationships

Before I discovered I was Autistic, I had a lot of "should"s running the show. I *should* go to that party; I *should* make small talk. I now know Autistic people regularly use these compensatory strategies (behaviors involving forcing yourself to do unnatural things in order to appear less Autistic). One way this often shows up is by forcing yourself to socialize when you are low on social energy.

Many Autistic people have a much smaller social battery than the average person. We also may enjoy socializing less than others do. Personally, I've learned that larger gatherings, especially indoors, overwhelm my nervous system and trigger a state of freeze (low-key dissociation due to sensory overload). In such states, enjoying socializing becomes challenging, if not impossible. As part of my self-care regimen, I now prioritize social events where I can be truly present and engaged. For me, this means enjoying outdoor walks with friends, playing games with my immediate family, and connecting through email, text, and other forms that don't require a lot of people in a room together.

It also means I say no to more things, without guilt. I focus on saying yes to events that align with my social preferences. I mindfully consider my "social spoons" (in this context, spoons are energy units that represent my capacity for social interaction) and strategically invest them in meaningful interactions. You can do the same thing for your self-care plan—assess what works for you, then attend events that appeal to you and decline invitations to gatherings that create stress and discomfort.

Finally, know that it's okay to enjoy being alone—it doesn't mean anything's wrong with you if you don't need copious socializing. So go ahead and recharge that social battery and spend time doing things you enjoy! Honoring your social boundaries is essential to building healthy and fulfilling relationships.

Manage Clashing Sensory Needs

Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships play a significant role in many of our lives, and it's essential to consider how your self-care practices can address the unique needs that arise in these relationships. Depending on your and your partner's sensory profiles, you may be working with vastly different sets of needs. For example, one partner could lean toward sensory-seeking behaviors in touch, while the other might be more sensory avoidant. Similarly, one might find comfort in sensory-seeking movements, while the other could be sensitive to sound, finding their partner's frequent movements overwhelming to their senses.

The key thing to keep in mind when sorting through sensory needs is that it's a matter of addressing clashing sensory needs, not a matter of character flaws. Without this mindset, it's easy to resort to character-based attributions, like labeling someone as "too loud" or "too sensitive." By adopting a cooperative lens, you can shift focus from assigning blame to simply recognizing the sensory dynamics involved. This shift transitions the discussion to effective problem-solving. Rather than seeing clashing sensory needs as a reflection of individual inadequacies, you can recognize it as a mutual obstacle requiring resolution.

To manage both parties' needs, consider following these steps:

1. Identify each partner's sensory needs.
2. Pinpoint high-clash areas.
3. Develop joint solutions that cater to everyone's sensory preferences.

This approach fosters a relationship that values and accommodates diverse sensory experiences and allows you to enjoy spending time with your partner. When your sensory needs are met, you'll find yourself more relaxed, grounded, and able to truly connect with your partner.

Explore Gender and Sexuality

Romantic Relationships

Autistic people tend to diverge from cis-het (cisgender-heterosexual) norms more than their allistic counterparts. For some of us, conforming to cis-het norms has been an integral aspect of our masking, making the journey to uncover our gender and sexual identities uniquely complex, especially if we discover them later in life.

Understanding your gender and sexual identities is a cornerstone for establishing meaningful and authentic romantic relationships. This exploration spans various dimensions, including gender, sexuality, relationship preferences, and engagement with kink culture.

As you unmask, consider these aspects:

- **Gender identity:** Autistic people identify as genderqueer at much higher rates than allistic people. Embracing your authentic gender identity will enrich your self-understanding and deepen your connections.
- **Sexuality:** Grasping the nuances of your sexuality and preferences will help you communicate transparently with partners. If you are queer, you may appreciate the term "neuroqueer," which refers to those of us who are neurodivergent and also queer.
- **Kink culture:** Some Autistic people find solace within kink culture. This realm offers a unique blend of playfulness and heightened sensory pleasure within the context of sexuality.
- **Polyamory versus monogamy:** Polyamory appears to be more common among Autistic people. If that resonates with you, talk with your partner early on in your relationship so that you can discuss dynamics and establish consensual agreements.

As you explore who you truly are, be gentle and patient with yourself.

Identify Your Love Language

Romantic Relationships

"Love languages" is a phrase coined by Dr. Gary Chapman in his 1992 book *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate.* It describes the ways in which people prefer to give and receive love. He proposed that people have unique approaches to expressing and accepting love and suggested that when partners openly discuss these love languages, it can strengthen emotional connections and relationships.

Dr. Chapman's five love languages include:

- **Words of Affirmation:** Expressing love and appreciation through verbal compliments, praise, and encouragement.
- **Acts of Service:** Expressing love through considerate actions and kind gestures.
- **Receiving Gifts:** Feeling loved through meaningful gifts.
- **Quality Time:** Feeling loved through spending quality time and undivided attention.
- **Physical Touch:** Feeling loved through physical affection like hugs, kisses, holding hands, and other forms of touch.

As an Autistic person, however, you may find that some of these traditional love languages don't naturally align with your preferences and sensory needs. For instance, verbal Words of Affirmation can feel overwhelming for me, and I can more easily appreciate them in written form. Acts of Service might be your way of showing love, but demand avoidance or burnout can make them challenging to execute. And Receiving Gifts might be uncomfortable due to difficulty concealing emotions and the pressure to respond in an "appropriate" way to the gift giver. Quality Time can be enjoyable when balanced with alone time, and Physical Touch can be complicated depending on sensory sensitivities!

What all that boils down to is that these traditional love languages might not work for you—which is absolutely fine. You might instead possess distinct love languages that better suit your needs and journeys.

Here are some alternative love languages to contemplate:

- **Info swapping or info dumping:** Sharing passions and interests through passionate dialogue and engaging in shared activities or discussions related to each other's interests.
- **Parallel play:** Engaging in similar activities alongside each other without the demand for ongoing conversation.
- **Sensory comfort:** Expressing love in a sensory-friendly environment or via comfort objects.
- **Respect for boundaries:** Demonstrating love by respecting personal boundaries and sensory sensitivities.
- **Written expressions:** Writing notes to express feelings and communicate love.
- **Predictability and routine:** Demonstrating love by providing a stable and predictable environment.

Naturally, every individual is distinct. You might connect with the classic or alternative love languages, enjoy some of each, or have your own preferences altogether. What matters most is the ability to discuss how you express and experience love with your partner. Engage in open conversations so everyone is on the same page and both you and your partner can feel seen, appreciated, and happy.

Navigate Dating Apps and Websites

Romantic Relationships

Navigating dating apps has become an essential aspect of modern dating. However, it can bring about some unique challenges and anxieties for Autistic people. Questions about whether or not to disclose your autism, handling unpredictable first dates, and ensuring safety can create a whirlwind of uncertainties.

Here's a collection of tips to guide you through crafting your profile, initiating conversations, and arranging dates:

- **Consider selective self-disclosure:** If you're unsure about disclosing your autism, consider including a partial self-disclosure in your profile, such as "I am neurodivergent." This up-front approach can help you find connections with people who are accepting of your neurodivergence while also avoiding a full self-disclosure that may lead to discomfort or unnecessary pressure and discrimination.
- **Attract the right match:** The information you choose to share can shape the type of people you draw toward you. Highlight the aspects of yourself that hold the most significance and resonate with your values. Given that many Autistic people are value driven, it's likely that you'll find better compatibility with those who share your values. If you hold values that are nonnegotiable for you, consider including them on your page. For instance, you can express, "I strongly align with antiracist, queer-affirming, and anti-ableist values." This approach will ensure a more compatible connection.
- **Showcase special interests:** Many Autistic people connect deeply when discussing shared interests. Consider incorporating your interests into your profile to provide conversation starters that can foster meaningful connections with people who share your interests (bonus—this will often create an opener for more object-based conversations).

- **Minimize idealization:** Some people create idealized images of those they've connected with online. This inclination may be heightened among Autistic people, as many of us gravitate toward fantasy as a means of escape (fantasy often feels simpler than real life). Additionally, our penchant for turning a person into a special interest can lead to intense infatuation. To maintain realistic expectations, consider meeting in person relatively early on. Direct face-to-face interaction can offer a truer representation of the individual, helping you form a more accurate perception.
- **Prioritize safety:** Be vigilant about recognizing potential red flags during interactions, and have initial meetings in safe places. Autistic people can be more vulnerable to victimization because we sometimes struggle to perceive ill intentions. When engaging with someone online, prioritize safety by having initial meetings in safe places and being cautious of people offering big, exciting things, such as "fly to California and I'll make you a model!" If an interaction feels questionable, don't hesitate to ask a trusted friend for their input.

Dating can be an enjoyable and fun way to meet new people. By addressing these points, you can fully immerse yourself in the moment, allowing you to focus on the person you are meeting rather than getting caught up in the logistical aspects of the date.

Plan a Sensory-Friendly Date

Romantic Relationships

You want dating to be fun and relaxing. But as an Autistic person, you also need to recognize the intricate connection between your sensory and social systems. Sensory overload can trigger stress responses in your nervous system, leading to either hyperarousal or hypoarousal states. In both cases, your social system goes offline, and with it, your ability to engage meaningfully with a partner. You might feel distant and detached, while your date might feel as if they aren't truly connecting with you.

For this reason, it is critical to consider the sensory environment of your first date, especially because first dates can be anxiety inducing to begin with!

Here are some ideas for sensory-friendly dates:

- **Nature outings:** If the weather permits, exploring a natural setting through an activity like hiking, kayaking, biking along a scenic route, birdwatching in a local park, or stargazing on a clear night can provide a unique opportunity for connection. Nature's calming effect can significantly regulate sensory experiences for many Autistic people, making it an ideal backdrop for meaningful interactions.
- **Intimate cafés and restaurants:** Opt for quiet and dimly lit cafés and restaurants. These settings create a cozy ambience that minimizes sensory overload and fosters comfortable conversation.
- **Stress-free walks:** Going for a walk can be an excellent choice. Walking offers built-in sensory regulation as it provides a rhythmic movement, which can be soothing. Additionally, walking naturally reduces the pressure of sustained eye contact, a common sensory demand.

- **Creative workshops or classes:** Consider engaging in a creative activity together—such as a painting class, pottery workshop, or cooking class—which provides a built-in form of parallel play. These environments invite opportunities for interaction while keeping the focus on the activity, which can ease social stress.
- **Outdoor picnics:** A picnic in a calm outdoor location can be a great alternative to a busy restaurant. You have control over the sensory environment, allowing for a more relaxed and sensory-friendly atmosphere.
- **Botanical gardens or arboretums:** Exploring the vibrant colors, textures, and scents of a botanical garden or arboretum can be a grounding but sensory-rich and relaxing experience. These environments offer serene backdrops for conversation and connection while being "event" related, reducing some of the social pressures.

Brainstorming and suggesting date locations that work for you is a proactive way to create an environment that fosters genuine connection and meaningful engagement. That way, you can focus on determining if this person is a good match for you.

Find Sensory Accommodations for Sexual Intimacy

Romantic Relationships

Sex is a highly sensory experience, creating unique challenges for many Autistic people. From demands for eye contact to bodily contact and the array of sensory experiences in between, navigating these aspects can be daunting.

In the same way that you accommodate your sensory needs in other areas of your life, it is just as important to consider ways of accommodating your sensory needs when it comes to your intimate life. This not only enhances your comfort and pleasure but also strengthens your connection with your partner.

However, addressing these considerations with partners can often stir feelings of insecurity and anxiety, leading to hesitance in initiating these conversations or avoiding them altogether. Nevertheless, an important part of your social self-care is communicating these needs to your partner. After all, each partner's comfort is essential for an enjoyable and meaningful sexual experience. While it might seem awkward to bring up, addressing these matters is the best option for the long-term strength of your relationship.

Here are a few accommodations to consider:

- **Touch:** Autistic people often have strong preferences around touch (firm versus soft). Communicating touch preferences can help your partner provide enjoyable touch within your comfort zone.
- **Clothing:** During a workshop exploring the intersection of kink culture and autism, a participant mused about whether garments linked to kink culture might serve as a "second skin," adding tactile protection during intimacy. If that resonates with you, consider whether certain garments could help make your experience better.

- **Body boundaries:** Establishing body boundaries is crucial for your sense of physical and emotional safety. Defining these boundaries, whether it's the amount of physical contact or specific areas to avoid, supports a respectful and pleasurable experience for both partners.
- **Eye contact:** Openly discussing the desired or undesired levels of eye contact during moments of intimacy can help reduce discomfort and allow both partners to feel at ease. For a playful approach, consider experimenting with blindfolds if this is within your comfort zone.
- **Lighting:** Lighting plays a significant role in sensory experiences. Opting for no lighting or dimmed lighting can greatly reduce your overall sensory load, providing more bandwidth for other sensory experiences.
- **Music:** While adding music may be too overstimulating for some, for others, a stim song may serve as a grounding function and provide a supportive addition.

These accommodations don't need to be static—you can use trial and error to see what works best and make changes as needed. This collaborative journey toward mutual pleasure and understanding can bring you even closer to your partner.

Build Emotional Intimacy

Romantic Relationships

Navigating the path to emotional intimacy can pose some unique challenges for Autistic people, especially if you also have alexithymia (refer to Grasp Difficult Emotions in Chapter 3). Cross-neurotype relationships can make the situation even more complex.

Here are key considerations for nurturing deeper emotional connections with your partner:

- **Identify what types of connections you value most:** Emotional connection varies widely, especially across different neurotypes. For instance, my intellectual connection with someone often feels like a profound emotional bond. However, I've noticed this experience is less common among allistic people, who tend to differentiate intellectual and emotional connections. Many allistic people tend to prefer using emotionally rich and socially based language to build emotional connections. Initiating a dialogue with your partner about which types of conversations make you both feel emotionally connected is a crucial starting point.
- **Explore different communication mediums:** If verbally articulating intense emotions proves challenging, explore alternative ways to share your inner world. Composing letters, expressing yourself through art, or sharing meaningful songs can serve as an alternative channel for conveying your feelings. Moreover, this approach can act as an "emotional prompt" that encourages your partner to ask questions so you can further explore your inner world together.
- **Do activities together:** Engaging in activities that hold emotional significance for both partners generates shared moments of emotional closeness.

- **Know your limit:** It's essentially impossible to be emotionally connected when you're flooded, which is a state of emotional overload where it becomes challenging to think or communicate clearly. And Autistic people become flooded more easily! Recognizing your threshold and temporarily stepping away from the conversation until you're ready to reengage is crucial for maintaining healthy interactions.
- **Adapt "active listening":** It is well-known that active listening is very important in relationships—paying close attention to what someone says and being able to reflect it back to them empowers us to grasp differing viewpoints and validate emotions. Nevertheless, practicing active listening can sometimes overwhelm the Autistic system, ironically diminishing the effectiveness of this very practice. If sustained eye contact proves taxing, consider shifting conversations to a walking setting, making active listening more manageable. Alternatively, you may find that your active listening flourishes during parallel tactile activities like baking or shared doodling.
- **Reflect and communicate:** Dedicate consistent time for open conversation. Engaging in discussions about the evolution of emotional needs and changing preferences as your relationship advances can deepen your connection. Consider incorporating questions encouraging self-reflection, such as "What is one new thing I learned about myself in our interactions this week?" and "What is a small change we can make to enhance our connection?" This practice can establish a structured space for open dialogue, creating an expected ritual and routine.

By recognizing the distinct strengths and challenges in neurodiverse partnerships, you lay the foundation for cultivating emotional intimacy. You can achieve emotional closeness by being open with your partner about your emotional landscape.

Resolve Conflict in Relationships

Romantic Relationships

Navigating conflict in relationships is complex, especially in neurodiverse partnerships (in this context, neurodiverse means two different neurotypes are involved). Adding to this, conflicts can easily overwhelm Autistic people due to our heightened sensory and nervous systems, resulting in conflict avoidance.

Here are key points to consider when addressing conflict:

Communication Basics

- **Consider neurodiversity:** Varying communication styles can lead to misunderstandings. Approach conflict with an openness to comprehend and learn from each other's perspectives.
- **Practice clear and direct communication:** Express your viewpoint and feelings clearly, and also actively listen to your partner's perspective. Allow both parties uninterrupted time to voice concerns. If your partner communicates indirectly, support their growth in direct communication with patience as they refine this skill.
- **Use an open-dialogue format:** Foster an environment where both partners feel secure sharing thoughts and emotions. Keep in mind that Autistic people often face challenges in tone modulation and recognition. If your partner perceives your tone as harsh, consider this feedback. Likewise, your partner should recognize tone modulation difficulties as a part of your Autistic experience.

Navigating Sensory and Emotional Overload

- **Manage your nervous system:** Renowned couples therapist Dr. John Gottman employed a unique strategy involving partners wearing heartbeat-monitoring devices (like smartwatches). If one partner's heartbeat surpassed a specific threshold, the conversation halted. Dr. Gottman knew that effective communication wanes beyond a certain stress level. This example is valuable because it provides couples with a tangible reminder to stop when things get heated! Additionally, it's crucial to be aware of "faux regulation," which your partner might not recognize as stress. Faux regulation occurs when you seem calm but are actually in a state of stress—such as the freeze-fawn mode (see Understand Your Body's Responses to Stress in Chapter 2).
- **Take time-outs:** Understand when sensory or emotional overload is at play. Agree on signals for time-outs if either of you is feeling overwhelmed.
- **Account for sensory considerations:** Factor in sensory sensitivities. Choose a comfortable, quiet space to discuss conflicts, minimizing sensory triggers.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

- **Define the issue:** Clearly state the problem to prevent confusion (note that in cross-neurotype conflicts, differing definitions of the issue can be common, making clarity crucial as a starting point!).
- **Brainstorm solutions:** Generate ideas together, prioritizing compromises that honor both parties' needs.
- **Implement agreements:** Act on jointly agreed-upon solutions, periodically evaluating their effectiveness and doing regular check-ins.

Disagreements aren't fun—but they are unavoidable. Honoring your neurodiversity and being intentional in your communication can deepen mutual understanding and help you navigate conflicts more constructively.

Embrace an Aromantic or Asexual Identity

Romantic Relationships

There is an outdated stereotype that Autistic people can't be sexual or romantic. And while this stereotype comes from antiquated and ableist thinking about autism, it is also important to acknowledge that many of us do identify as asexual and/or aromantic (sometimes referred to as ace/aro or the ace/aro spectrum).

The ace/aro spectrum encompasses a broad array of orientations, spanning from asexuality (lack of sexual attraction) to aromanticism (lack of romantic feelings) to demisexuality (partial or conditional sexual attraction based on intense emotional connection). It's important to know that many people who identify as asexual or aromantic still seek profound connections. For example, they might be drawn to enduring platonic partnerships.

Embarking on a journey of self-discovery while embracing your ace/aro identity can be an empowering process, particularly if your Autistic mask once projected a sexualized version of yourself. For some, sensory sensitivities can complicate physical relationships, and you might be in the process of determining what is sensory aversion and what might be an ace/aro identity. If you've just learned about your autism, you might want to take that opportunity to dissect your identity, differentiate sensory needs from your genuine self, and unravel the influences of your mask on your sexual history and inclinations.

Traditional cultural and societal narratives often disregard ace/aro identities, which can feel isolating. Remember that forging meaningful connections is a unique path without one single right way. Prioritize self-care by not judging yourself based on societal expectations but instead embracing and loving yourself for who you are.